DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 256 848 UD 024 221

AUTHOR Ray, James E.; Knapp, Robert
TITLE A Process to Ensure a Successful School Improvement Project. The Effective School Report from Research and Practice, Vol 2, No. 17.
PUB DATE Dec 84
NOTE 5p.
AVAILABLE FROM The Effective School Report, KELWYNN, Inc., Grand Central Station, P.O. Box 2058, New York, NY 10163 ($3.00).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT The Effective School Report; v2 n12 Dec 1984

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Schools; *Educational Assessment; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Evaluation Criteria; Models; *Program Development; *Program Implementation; *School Effectiveness; Staff Role
IDENTIFIERS *Michigan (Flint); *School Improvement Project MI

ABSTRACT

The Flint (Michigan) Community Schools developed a four-phase School Improvement process model. In Phase 1 (Commitment), school district and administrative support were obtained and pilot schools were selected (one elementary and one middle school). The principals of these schools and one teacher representative from each received training in effective schools concepts. For each school, an action team of administrators and teachers was organized, and the project moved into Phase 2, Data Collection. The Connecticut School Improvement Interview and School Effectiveness Questionnaire were used to collect data from teachers, archival data were assembled, and student and staff behavior were observed. In Phase 3, Action Planning, the action teams reviewed and interpreted the data and developed the following problem solving process: (1) assess needs and analyze information; (2) write problem statements; (3) explore options and select appropriate course of action; (4) write goal statements; (5) develop action steps; and (6) develop evaluation criteria. Action plans developed using this process were presented to the schools. The action teams continue to meet to monitor plan implementation. In Phase 4, Follow-Up, achievement, teacher questionnaire, and archival data will be used to evaluate the effects of the improvement project. The selection of action team members is seen as the most crucial aspect of the process; they must be committed to improvement, have the respect of other staff members, and be willing to take leadership roles. (KH)

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The
Effective School Report
from Research and Practice

A Process to Ensure a Successful School Improvement Project

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to provide a "nuts and bolts" understanding of a school improvement project by those most responsible for its success. It is our hope that such information will prove beneficial to school districts which plan to or are currently involved in instituting such a project.

Never has the timing for such an endeavor been more appropriate. Numerous reports critical of the state of public education in America have prompted a search at the district level for a framework for improving schools. The effective schools/school improvement movement provides such a framework.

A four-phase process model of Flint Community Schools' School Improvement Project has been developed and is the subject of this article.

Phase I: COMMITMENT

School District Commitment

Flint Community Schools have long been known for innovative approaches to the educational process. One of the best examples of Flint's commitment to progressive education is the development of the community school concept. A basic tenet of the community school philosophy is that it is the people in the school who are responsible for developing the school's purpose and direction.

It was in the best tradition of the community school concept that Flint Schools chose to be involved in a school-based improvement project such as effective schools. Flint Schools committed the time and resources needed to carry out such a project. Without this firm commitment from top administrative levels, a school improvement project would no doubt have failed to accomplish its goals. The many resources needed for implementation requires significant support, especially time and money.

School Identification

Because of the extensive resources required for such a project and because fadism has been a problem in public schools, Flint chose to approach the project on a pilot basis. It was decided that one elementary and one middle school would be chosen to be involved. This kept the project to a manageable size and broke new ground by including a middle school — an area which had not previously been involved in school improvement projects.

A criteria for pilot school selection was established. The criteria included:

1. Schools with stable teacher and student populations.
2. Schools with improving test scores.
3. Schools with a record of community cooperation.
4. Schools with large minority populations.

Many of the districts' elementary and middle schools fit these criteria.

Initial School Contact

The principals of the qualifying schools were approached and asked if they and their staffs might be interested in participating in a school improvement project. Participation was voluntary. It was felt that to force schools to participate would violate the basic tenets of a school-based improvement project.

In order to fully inform the school staffs of the nature of the project, the school principal and one teacher representative from each of the schools selected were included in three two-day training sessions offered at Michigan State University by Dr. Larry Lezotte and the late Dr. Ronald Edmonds. The training was extensive and brought into focus all of the aspects of the effective schools concept. A thorough review of the literature was conducted and several pilot programs were reviewed. Once provided with this theoretical base, the district was then prepared to enlist the commitment of the school staffs.

School Commitment

The principal, representative teacher, and two central administrators met with the two school staffs. At this time the theoretical framework upon which effective schools is based, the specific goals and objectives of Flint's School Improvement Project, and an outline of project activities were presented to the staffs of these two schools.

The project was discussed and the teachers' questions and concerns were answered. The school staffs had no objections to being involved in the project, but wholehearted commitment was not forthcoming. This was to cause problems later in the program.

An action team from each school was organized. Each team consisted of the principal, the teacher who attended the training sessions, and three to five additional teachers. In the case of the elementary school, these teachers were selected by grade level assignment and area of instruction (i.e., special education, etc.). The additional middle school teachers were chosen one from each of the instructional teams. Thus, with strong commitment from the school district and agreement from the school staffs, the program was ready to begin.

Phase II: DATA COLLECTION

Preparation For Data Collection

Flint was faced with the choice of developing its own instrument to collect data concerning the effective schools correlates or adopting instrumentation developed by another educational institution. Survey construction and testing is an involved process, thus, the latter choice was made in order to implement the project in a timely manner. **The Connecticut School Improvement Interview** and **The Connecticut School Effectiveness Questionnaire** were chosen for use because they: 1) are thorough in their treatment of effective schools' correlates, 2) have been tested for validity and reliability, 3) provide quantitative data from an interview and a questionnaire format, and 4) include a home-school correlate.

The interview format was chosen to collect baseline data. It was felt that a one-to-one interview would build commitment on the part of the school staffs by involving them in the data collection process. The questionnaire version of the instrument will be used to collect data at the end of each school year in order to determine changes in staff perceptions concerning the effective schools correlates.

Application of the interview method required the hiring and training of five interviewers. The interviewers were chosen from retired and pink-slipped Flint teachers. A Connecticut State

(Continued on page 2)

In This Issue:

Bloom's Classroom Research 2
Questions and Answers 4

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Vol. 2 No. 12 — Dedicated to Ron Edmonds — December 1984

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Bloom's Classroom Research

Lawrence W. Lezotte

Implicit in the school improvement programs which have evolved from the effective schools research is the belief that a school can become even more effective in teaching all the children within that school. Indeed, perhaps the most significant difference between the effective and less effective schools is the staff's perception of the learning potential of students. Teachers utilizing effective schools research believe that all children can learn what the school wants them to know and to be able to do.

School improvement planning and implementation requires the staff to have high expectations for success. Not only must the staff evidence the belief that all children can and will learn, but the teachers themselves must possess a high sense of their own efficacy as instructors. Finally, the staff must possess the certainty that they, collectively, have the wherewithal to change or redesign their school and classroom practices toward their vision of school improvement.

While such beliefs and expectations are essential to the overall change and improvement process, they do not stand alone. They must be quickly translated by the teachers into behaviors which evidence high expectations for their students and for themselves as professionals. Teachers are continually involved in efforts to search out examples of exemplary instructional practices, which if adopted, will lead to improved school and classroom effectiveness. At the present time it remains a challenge to locate descriptions of such practices. In fact, teachers say they are frequently thwarted in their efforts to maintain and sustain a classroom climate of high expectations. "How," teachers ask, "can we teach all children when the class sizes are large and the students' achievement levels vary so greatly?"

The latest work of Benjamin Bloom offers some real encouragement. Summarized in the May 1984 issue of **Educational Leadership** in an article entitled "The Search for Methods of Group Instruction as Effective as One-To-One Tutoring," the research story and results are fascinating. Those familiar with the mastery learning studies of Bloom and his colleagues know that it is an instructional system based upon the belief that virtually all children can learn.

Those presently interested and involved in effective schools research will immediately grasp the possibility of using some of Bloom's findings and incorporating them into classroom instructional improvement practices. The study provides a well-articulated methodological model, as well as a refined description of instructional processes and practices that can be used to reach and teach all students.

Using a procedure similar to that of the current teacher and school effectiveness research, Bloom's (et al) study begins with what researchers perceive to be the best instructional practice available for improving student achievement — one-to-one tutoring. They then engage in a systematic examination of a variety of teaching strategies which are possible to use in typical classroom settings. It was the researchers' goal to find a combination of teaching strategies which, when utilized, will produce achievement results as similar as possible to those achieved with one-to-one tutoring.

It is impossible to fairly review this research in detail here. You must read the article!

One final observation about "Group Instruction ...," Bloom, in describing the research, indicates that it can be implemented by an individual teacher in the context of a single classroom. While this is probably true, I believe more success will surely come more quickly if the entire staff of a school is committed to changing their instructional practices to more closely reflect the "mastery learning plus" techniques described by Bloom.

Educational practitioners are deeply indebted to Professor Bloom and his colleagues for this helpful piece of research.

Let us know what you think about these techniques and their usefulness in helping you and your colleagues to teach all your students.

A PROCESS TO ENSURE ...

(Continued from page 1)

Department of Education person was brought in to conduct the training session. This ensured proper and complete training of the interviewers.

Data Collection

Arrangements were made to have the interviewers visit each of the schools for a full day to conduct interviews. Substitute teachers were hired to cover the teachers' classes while they were being interviewed. Substitutes were used to show to the teachers that the school district was committed to the project and to avoid using the teachers' valuable preparation time for interviews. Additionally, this process allowed data collection to take place in a timely manner.

Archival data was also collected for each of the schools. This data consisted of discipline and attendance policies, student test score data, statements of school purpose, written academic objectives, academic requirements, retention data, homework policy, and instructional guidelines.

To further support the written archival data, observers were sent to the two schools to observe student and staff behavior in the classrooms, halls, and playgrounds. A written summary of these observations organized by correlate were included in the archival data.

Data Summarization

Information collected by the interviewers was tallied, and frequency (percentage) of responses (not respondents) was computed. The purpose of data summarization was to report raw data, not to analyze (draw inferences) the information. The summarized data was transferred to a form similar to the interview form. The form included the interview question, the structured response category, the number of responses for each category, the percent of responses for each category, and the number of non-responses.

The interview data was also summarized by each of the seven correlates and presented in bar graph form. This was done in order to provide an easy-to-interpret overview of each correlate for the action teams. The interview data for each question and each correlate and the archival data were assembled into notebooks and served as the basis for development of action plans.

Phase III: ACTION PLANNING

Development of Action Plans

The School Improvement Advisory Committee recognized the complexity of developing meaningful action plans. Thus, it was decided that the action teams should meet at a site outside the regular school district facilities. This allowed the teams to work intensively, away from the day-to-day routine of the school, and build an important group cohesiveness.

The action teams were assembled for a two-day work session. They worked separately. Their charge was to review and interpret the interview and archival data and design action plans to address the specific needs of each school. During this off-site, it was realized that two days were not a sufficient period of time to complete the action planning process, and a third day-long work session was subsequently scheduled.

A six-step problem solving process was developed based upon the work of the Connecticut State Department of Education/Northeast Regional Exchange School Effectiveness Project. This process guided the development of well articulated action plans.

1. Needs Assessment/Information Analysis
   Purpose: To organize information into useable blocks for interpretation.
2. Write Problem Statements
   Purpose: To interpret information and to organize information into a specific, coherent written form.

(Continued on page 3)

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Editorial contributions must be accompanied by return postage and will be handled with reasonable care. Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited art, photos and manuscripts.

Published 12 times a year.
Printed and mailed from KELWYNN, Inc.
1636 Lelia Drive
Jackson, MS 39216
1 800 874-9740

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A PROCESS TO ENSURE ...

(Continued from page 2)

3. Explore Options and Select An Appropriate Course of Action
   Purpose: To explore, as thoroughly as possible, courses of action and to select the option most appropriate for the specific school.
4. Write the Goal Statements
   Purpose: To write, in specific terms, the end product or outcome of the action plan.
5. Develop Action Steps
   Purpose: To detail, in writing, all the steps needed to achieve the course of action selected.
6. Develop Evaluation Criteria
   Purpose: To establish criteria to be used as a basis for evaluating the success of action plan implementation.

Needs Assessment/Information Analysis

The interview data was presented to the action team one correlate at a time. The team selected the correlate to be analyzed first and agreed to start with a correlate which was not controversial in order to facilitate learning the problem solving process. The first step involved in determining if an individual question within a correlate indicated that: 1) a concern, 2) a possible concern, or 3) no concern existed. A criterion, the percentage of responses above and below a numerical rating of "3", was established by the team to determine the level of concern. This process was very mechanical and did not involve in-depth discussion of the questions. The Needs Assessment/Information Analysis step was completed for each of the seven correlates before moving on to the remaining steps which were completed before moving on to a new correlate.

Writing Problem Statements

The school's staff responses to the interview questions were discussed in-depth with particular attention paid to the questions rated as indicating an area of concern. The facilitators were responsible for helping the team members focus on the root cause(s) of concern within each of the correlates. As the team members defined concerns, work began on writing a statement describing each of the concerns expressed by the school's staff.

Exploring Options

Once the action team had clearly defined an area of concern expressed by the school staff, a brain storming session was initiated to explore possible courses of action. It was very important during this phase of action planning to accept all suggestions. Options were listed on a flip chart which served as a focal point for choosing an appropriate option. One-by-one the options were discussed until one or more courses of action were identified. Each course of action (option) was developed as a separate action plan.

Writing Goal Statements

As in any educational endeavor, the writing of clear, concise goals was of utmost importance. The goal was a restatement of the problem with the outcome or product expected included. The goal statement served as a guidepost for the writing of action steps and later for the presentation of action plans to the school staff.

Developing Action Steps

The recording of action steps consisted of four parts: steps to be taken, the person(s) responsible, a timeline, and evidence of accomplishment. The action team planned **all** of the steps to be taken in order to reach their stated goal. To leave out a step would inhibit the implementation of the action plan. A specific person(s) was identified to be responsible for the completion of each action step. The pitfall here was the tendency to make the principal responsible for too many of the steps. The other action team members were also responsible for completion of the steps.

When developing timelines for implementation, the team was as specific as possible. Tying the timeline to staff meetings and other calendar events, such as marking periods, was often helpful. Something specific was to happen at these times such as a report to the staff or completion of a project and was included in the evidence of accomplishment column.

Implementation

When the action team completed the development of action plans they returned to their school and presented the plans to their staff. This was accomplished by arranging an inservice for the staff in which the action team explained to the other teachers the problem solving process used. Problem statements and the data upon which they were based were discussed with the options explored and the rationale for selection of a course of action presented.

The staff was given an opportunity to discuss the goal statements. Attempts were made to gain consensus from the staff concerning the importance of each goal. If a consensus was not reached, it would have been unlikely that the action plan could have been effectively implemented. Once the goal was agreed to, the action steps were laid out with the responsibilities of the staff in each task clearly defined. The action team members were responsible for organizing staff and resources to accomplish tasks in accordance with the timeline.

It has been the experience of the Flint Schools that the action plans must be a regular part of at least every staff meeting. Projects such as this have a tendency to be placed on a back burner and forgotten. It is the responsibility of the action team members to continually bring the action plans to the attention of the total staff and to see to it that the action objectives are dealt with as planned.

Monitoring

Responsibility for implementation of the action plan lies solely with the action team; thus, they have been meeting regularly to monitor the progress of action plan implementation. As with the best laid plans, implementation may go astray. Action team meetings serve to review the action plans and to modify and clarify them as deemed necessary. The team must be careful not to water-down the action plans. If clear goal statements were written, this is much less likely to happen. It is helpful if the action team is responsible for making regular reports to the school staff and/or central administration. Modification of action plan must not be taken lightly.

Phase III: FOLLOW-UP

Determining the Effects of Participation

It is said that the process is as important as the product. Flint Schools found action planning and implementation to be a positive process. It required the schools to look at themselves and to plan appropriate courses of action. Perhaps most importantly it involved the school staffs in the process of awareness of change. Nevertheless, it is basic to the effective school concept that change should be evidenced in the academic accomplishments of the students. After all, school improvement is measured student improvement.

Summative Evaluation

Three sources of information are being collected to determine the effects of school improvement participation: achievement data, teacher questionnaire data, and archival data. Flint Schools have developed a promotion-graduation (PGR) test for grades K-8. This test reflects the goals and objectives of the school district and serves as an excellent measure of student achievement.

Plans have been made to collect PGR data for all students in the two participating schools for a three year period. The test scores are to be analyzed by the socio-economic levels of students. If effective schools theory holds true, the achievement gap between low SES students and middle and upper SES students should narrow as the implementation of the action plans takes effect. In addition, the achievement level for both groups should increase. At this point in time, the jury is still out, but by next school year (1984-85) preliminary results should be available.

The major problem encountered in analyzing student test scores is determining a student's socio-economic level. An attempt was made to make this determination by using free and subsidized lunch cards. In Flint, the use of such a system was not viable. Due to the economic problems encountered by cities which rely heavily upon automotive manufacturing, even middle socio-economic students are eligible for free or subsidized lunches.

A mother's level of education is also considered to be an excellent predictor of family SES. Research indicates that mothers without a high school education tend to belong to the lower SES group. Determining the mother's level of education (a very sensitive area) has been a problem. Surveys were sent home with students requesting this information, but the return rate has been inadequate in some instances.

Questionnaire data (discussed in Phase II, Preparation for Data Collection) will be collected at the conclusion of each school year and compared with the previous year's data. It is expected that the teachers' perceptions of the seven correlates, as applied to their school, will improve over time. Once again the results will not be known until the next school year.

Archival data is being collected based upon the action plans. If, for example, a discipline policy was to be rewritten, then the accomplishment of this goal will be evidenced by the actual rewritten policy.

LOOKING BACK

Much discussion has taken place concerning how the school improvement process may be improved. Collective agreement has been reached that the selection of action team members was crucial to effective action planning and implementation of the program. Action team members must be instructional leaders — teachers who are willing to facilitate the implementation of the program over a long (minimum three years) period of time.

Three criteria have been identified for the selection of effective action team members. First, team members must be committed to the improvement of their school and the education

(Continued on page 4)

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Questions and Answers

By Mae Beard

This month marks the completion of our discussion of questions that superintendents and other leaders responsible for implementing the effective schools process may face from their constituents. The questions and answers are intended to serve as a focal point for discussion, as background for presentations about effective schools, or as a reading material for those involved or about to become involved in the effective schools process. Superintendents contemplating the adoption of effective schools programs are well advised to become thoroughly conversant with the material covered in this and the previous two months columns before engaging in serious discussion with their governing boards or those who will be responsible for the implementation of effective school practices and procedures in their districts.

1. How will effective school activities fit with everything else the school is doing?

When effective school characteristics provide the framework for the activities of teachers and administrators, it soon becomes evident that many programs fit within these characteristics with a great deal of congruence. Therefore, one benefit of the effective schools process is that it structures current efforts under a common "umbrella" that pulls them into a coherent whole rather than a series of disjointed programs. In short, new and old practices may be examined to see how well they fit with the effective schools model rather than being adopted or retained on a piecemeal basis.

2. Is the effective school movement more public relations than substance?

Actually, the movement is more substance than public relations although a favorable public image is generally a pleasant by-product of the good student achievement occurring in effective schools. A careful examination of the policies, procedures, and practices embodied in the effective schools process will show they are intended to increase student achievement in the basic skills, not generate public relations.

3. How will the local staff be involved in planning for the effective schools process?

Effective schools are not possible without the involvement of the people who work with students. This means that those who are most involved with teaching and learning must be consulted in every step of the process from its initial introduction through consensus building, needs assessment, action planning, and institutionalization of effective school practices and procedures.

4. What kinds of changes will the effective school movement bring?

A look at the practices and characteristics of effective schools in terms of what presently exists in our own schools gives a pretty good idea of some of the changes that may take place in the future. The effective schools process will promote positive changes in our behavior because the culture and values of our schools will change in positive ways. We will stop doing things that inhibit student achievement and start doing things that enhance student achievement.

5. How will we measure school effectiveness?

One important measure of school effectiveness will be how well all of our students achieve in the basic skills. In order to find this out, we will need to "disaggregate" or "sort" standardized test data in terms of our students' backgrounds. Since an effective school is one in which all students achieve well in the basic skills regardless of family background, we will be able to see how effective we really are after we disaggregate our data. In other words, we can go beyond looking at average scores which do not tell the full story of how well all of our students are doing. Other measures will allow us to look at our performance with respect to specific school characteristics. All measures of effectiveness should be widely discussed so that all can see that the purpose of measurement will be school improvement.

6. How will teacher evaluation change as a result of the effective schools process?

The process looks at how the schools as a whole are organized to cause student learning. Effective schools usually have a good teacher evaluation system, but an examination of the characteristics of effective schools will clearly show that the process encompasses a range of issues that is far wider than teacher evaluation alone. It also must be recognized that teachers should be expected to behave in ways that are known to cause students to learn. Such behaviors certainly need to be central to any teacher evaluation process.

7. What does the effective school movement have to do with student achievement outcomes?

Student achievement outcomes are the primary "output" of the educational system. The effective schools process focuses on raising this output for **all** students through the application of the correct "inputs" which consist of effective school practices that work. Thus, student achievement outcomes become the primary focus for everyone in the school system because all recognize them as the most important "product" produced by schools.

8. What is the importance of standardized testing in the effective school?

Standardized tests are used to evaluate performance in the effective school because all programs focus on increasing student learning as measured by these tests. The tests are standardized so that teacher subjectivity can be removed as a source of error in the measurement of student learning. In addition, the tests used to evaluate student performance should be locally generated, nationally validated, curriculum based, and criterion referenced.

9. How does effective school evaluation differ from other more traditional school evaluation processes?

Traditional evaluations have concentrated on the maintenance of standards with the assumption that an examination of standards will result in student achievement. These evaluations examine such factors as number of books in the library, content area preparation of teachers, and physical facilities. The effective schools process acknowledges the importance of standards but concentrates more heavily on the complex of human behaviors that directly relate to student outcomes. This makes the emphasis in an effective schools evaluation quite different from a traditional evaluation which does not concentrate so heavily on student outcomes.

10. How does the effective schools process affect the classroom?

Most effective schools programs have resulted in an improved situation in the classroom because of their heavy emphasis on student achievement. Effective schools recognize that what goes on in the classroom is the most important activity of a school and of a school district. Teachers who work in an effective school learning climate find that their students behave better and produce more, their classes are interrupted less, and that academic achievement is given increased recognition. These are factors that contribute to an enjoyable and rewarding classroom environment.

11. What are the five most often mentioned "characteristics" or "correlates" of an effective school?

The November, 1983 **Effective School Report** lists the five correlates as:

1. School Climate
2. Leadership
3. High Expectations
4. Purpose
5. Measurement

This column concludes our three month discussion of the questions that were originally published in the June, 1984 **Effective School Report.**

Superintendents are encouraged to review and share the entire series with others. The questions also provide an excellent focus for discussion in governing board training or study sessions.

A PROCESS TO ENSURE ...

(Continued from page 3)

of its students. This commitment is best exhibited by teachers who volunteer for curriculum review committees and who are active in school functions. They must be people who take the time and energy to be involved in an on-going project such as school improvement.

Second, action team members must be viewed by the staff as positive contributors to the school. Team members must have the respect of other teachers and administrators in order to effectively implement action plans. Finally, team members must possess leadership abilities. They must be willing to take leadership roles and to follow through with their commitment to the school improvement process.

The Effective School Report

Published by KELWYNN, Inc.

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